Autumn Olive

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(*Elaeagnus umbellata* Thunberg)

Description Autumn olive is a deciduous shrub or small tree in the Oleaster family. Leaves are alternate, oval to lanceolate, and untoothed. The underside of the dark green leaf is covered with silver-white scales. The plant may grow to a height of 20 feet. The small, light yellow flowers are borne along twigs after the leaves have appeared early in the growing season. The small, round, juicy fruits are reddish to pink, dotted with scales, and produced in great quantity. Autumn olive is easily confused with a closely related species, Russian olive, which is also an invasive species. Russian olive has elliptic to lanceolate leaves, its branches are usually thorny, and its fruit is yellow, dry and mealy. Identification should be confirmed by a specialist.

Habitat Autumn olive has nitrogen-fixing root nodules which allow it to thrive in poor soils. Typical habitats are disturbed areas, roadsides, pastures and fields in a wide range of soils. Autumn olive is drought tolerant and may invade grasslands and sparse woodlands. It does not do well on wet sites or in densely forested areas.

Distribution Autumn olive was introduced to the United States from east Asia in the 1830's. It is found from Maine south to Virginia, and west to Wisconsin. Autumn olive was planted in the eastern and central United States for re vegetation of disturbed areas. Birds forage on its fruits and contribute to seed dispersal. It is widely distributed in Virginia, having been recorded in 46 counties.

Threats Autumn olive is a very troublesome invasive species in Virginia. In addition to its prolific fruiting, seed dispersal by birds, rapid growth and ability to thrive in poor soils, Autumn olive resprouts vigorously after cutting or burning. It creates heavy shade which suppresses plants that require direct sunlight.

Control Seedlings and sprouts can be hand-pulled when the soil is moist to insure removal of the root system. On larger plants, cutting alone results in thicker, denser growth. Burning during the dormant season also results in vigorous re sprouting.

A glyphosate herbicide can be used to control larger plants. Foliar application has proven effective in controlling these species. Since glyphosate is an nonselective herbicide it will affect all green vegetation with which it comes into contact. Care should be taken to avoid impacting native plant species. At sites where this is a concern, application of the herbicide to the freshly cut stumps of the invasive shrub should achieve the desired results. This method minimizes damage to other plants. Glyphosate herbicides are recommended because they are biodegradable. To be safe and effective, herbicide use requires knowledge of the chemicals and their appropriate concentrations as well as understanding of the method and timing of their application. Consult an agricultural extension agent or a natural resource specialist for more information on these control methods.

Reference: http://www.vnps.org/invasive/inveleag.htm